

# Assessment modes in undergraduate Psychology: student achievement and staff-student perceptions

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## Background and rationale

This research has used both quantitative and a qualitative methodologies and has involved staff and students from the Psychology Division of the University of Wolverhampton.

In common with other Divisions within University of Wolverhampton, the Psychology Division has taken pains to develop an innovative assessment regime which includes a variety of modes of assessment i.e. a move away from the 'standard' essay/project/examination diet common to most academic subjects some years ago.

Assessments in Psychology now comprise:

- Essays
- Reports
- Projects
- Presentations
- Group presented research
- Computer aided self-testing
- Multiple choice tests
- Case-study presentations
- Data-analysis tests

In consequence, there is a need to audit the outcomes of these changes as well as to attempt to maintain a balanced diet of assessment across programmes. Also, as psychologists interested in the dynamics of assessment (not just the outcomes), it is also valuable to consider the dynamics of the assessment mode, the assessor and the individuals/groups being assessed.

The current research has focused upon student assessment regimes and student achievement on undergraduate programmes in Psychology. It has aimed to examine student achievement as well as student and staff 'stories' about assessment.

The over-arching research question was:

'Is there a relationship between *modes* (types) of student assessment and student performance...and if there is what is the nature of that *dynamic*?'

## Rationale and themes

As academics and as students we are stakeholders in the business of assessment. It is therefore and important for us to understand something about the dynamics of in particular:

- the effect this might have on learning and student achievement in terms of whether or not differential types of assessment have differential grade outcomes
- how students view themselves as learners and whether or not they 'sign' up or feel any 'ownership' of the assessment process
- how staff view assessment—is it something we 'do' to students? Something we do with them?

## **The research**

The quantitative aspects of the methodology are reported first and this is followed by an account of the qualitative methods and focus questions.

### **Quantitative considerations**

- Design
- Variables
- Sample
- Data analysis

Two complete cohorts of Psychology students' information provided the sample and the data for the quantitative analysis of student assessment grades:

- BSc(Hons) Psychology
- BSc(Hons) Combined Awards Psychology
- 1996 student entry (n 280)
- 1997 student entry (n 240)

Variables to be considered were:

- Gender
- Age
- Entry Qualifications
- Degree Scheme

by

- Level
- Module
- Assessment Mode

### **Qualitative considerations**

Following a grounded theory approach, individual in depth interviews were conducted with small samples (n6) of students and staff (n3).

The open question asked of students was:

‘How do you feel about assessments and about being assessed?’

The question to staff was:

‘When we assess students, what is it that we assess?’

## **Outcomes (preliminary findings)**

### **Quantitative findings**

Data is undergoing analysis (multiple ANOVA tests) but early indications (eyeballing the data) suggest that most students do best (get higher grades) on:

- Multiple choice tests
- Computer-aided tests

- Essays
- Reports

Gender, Entry Qualifications, Age effects—analysis to be completed as the project continues during 2001/2.

### **Qualitative findings**

How is assessment, and being assessed, viewed by students and by staff? Preliminary themes (stories) emerging from the research were:

Students:

- felt that assessment is done ‘to’ them by staff and thus feel little ownership of it (little responsibility for it?)
- feel it is their worth (not merely that of their work) that is being assessed
- spoke in terms of ‘*me*’...not of ‘*my work*’

‘I am being tested’  
 ‘Will I be good enough?’  
 ‘I’m on trial—put on the spot’

It is important to notice the language—no student spoke of

‘my work’  
 ‘my skills’  
 ‘my knowledge’

Staff were more likely to speak, initially, in the ‘pedagogese’ of skills, competencies and knowledge, however, the interviews also revealed staff perceptions of likely student stories on assessment and being assessed.

‘I remember how it felt to be assessed as a student, and as a post-graduate. It was scary. When I assess students now I go back to those feelings and my ‘student voice’ is still around.’

### **Future developments**

**The quantitative analyses** lend themselves to processing data which already exists on University records and which will provide useful information in terms of Psychology subject review as well as in teaching and learning issues per se.

**The qualitative aspects** give some insight into the thoughts and feelings that accompany assessment in a Higher Education setting.

The quantitative findings, focusing on potential differential effects of assessment modes will have implications for:

- 1) Staff reflexivity in planning curriculum design and assessment
- 2) Attempting a ‘balanced diet’ of assessment
- 3) Assessment regimes at different student levels, ages and stages
- 4) Staff development and enhancement of peer-learning

The qualitative aspects of the work may focus our attention upon:

- 1) Students as ‘stake-holders’ in assessment—agents as well as patients

- 2) Feedback issues: 'is it *me* or my work that is being valued'
- 3) Staff as a 'biased example' of how students *should* view assessment: many of us aimed to be academics—most of our students don't!

## **Evaluation**

As the project proceeded the methodology and the data analysis was evaluated by both staff and students, all of whom have varying degrees of expertise/experience in Psychology research.

The author is particularly grateful to those members of the Psychology Division who lent their expertise in terms of offering a critical appraisal of the interviewing techniques developed during the project.